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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9630
INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
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DIA WASHINGTON DC
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000320

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER, CAMP), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: MOPS PREF PHUM PGOV PREL ASEC CE
SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 37

Ref: A) Colombo 316 B) Colombo 310 C) Colombo 307 D) Colombo 304
E) Colombo 299 F) Colombo 294 G) Colombo 287 H) Colombo 282 I)
Colombo 279 J) Colombo 277 K) Colombo 265

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Government provided a 2-ton shipment of medical supplies for civilians in the conflict area on March 22, the first in a month. Following on the death of a local CARE worker in the conflict area, the Government accused both CARE and the deceased of supporting the LTTE. The next delivery of food to trapped civilians will not occur until earliest March 26. Ambassador emphasized to Foreign Minister Bogollagama the need to stop shelling and provide regular shipments of food and medicine to the trapped civilians. Large numbers of civilians continue to flee the conflict area. End Summary.

Shipment of Medical Supplies

¶2. (SBU) The Government provided via ICRC-flagged vessel a 2-ton shipment of medicines and medical supplies to the conflict zone on March 22, the first such shipment since February 20. These items could last for two to three weeks and represent a very positive step. ICRC confirms that surgical items were included, including antibiotics and intravenous drugs. Rabies vaccination was needed, and was provided. However, no anesthetics were part of the shipment and continue to be desperately needed. On March 23, Ambassador urged Foreign Minister Bogollagama to ensure regular delivery of urgently needed food and medicine to trapped civilians.

Less Shelling in Civilian Concentrations

¶3. (SBU) ICRC reports that the weekend of March 21-22 saw an

improvement, but not a cessation, in shelling affecting the trapped civilian population, in part because civilians have moved closer to the coast. The aerial bombardment that has taken place has been on the edge of the safe zone. This improvement could be temporary; Embassy will continue to monitor reports of shelling and aerial bombings. The Ambassador underlined to the foreign minister that shelling continued over the weekend, albeit at a reduced rate. The March 22 ICRC evacuation still included persons wounded by shrapnel.

Ministry of Defense Accusation Against CARE

¶4. (SBU) On March 17, a 24-year old CARE local employee R. Sabesan was wounded in the leg by shelling in the Government-designated "safe zone". No medical treatment was available, and he later died from the injury. The Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka issued a statement regarding his death on March 19, remarking, "unfortunately, the death of Mr. Sabesan is an insight into the larger circumstances confronting civilians trapped by fighting in the conflict area." On March 23, the Ministry of Defense posted on its website a diatribe accusing CARE and Sabesan of aiding the LTTE. CARE Country Director Nick Osborne commented to Ambassador that they have no reason to believe the worker had affiliation with the LTTE, and that he had been preparing to risk flight from the conflict zone the following day with his family. Osborne further notes that CARE was fully cooperating with the Government's investigation of another employee mentioned in the statement. Ambassador suggested Osborne raise the issue directly with Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, and further offered to accompany him. Osborne intends to wait several days for the rhetoric to calm before deciding on an approach.

Next Food Delivery Delayed

¶5. (SBU) World Food Programme (WFP) reports that the "Vin-Tan" vessel which carried 1000MT of food (largely US food aid) to the conflict area from March 8 through 19 is not immediately available for another trip. The Government advised WFP that the Government-owned ship is needed in Jaffna, and would not be available to WFP until at earliest March 26. At least 500MT of food is needed to support the estimated 150,000-plus people per week at survival rations level. Any delay beyond a week could imperil the estimated 150,000 civilians, who suffered insufficient food shipments in February 2009. Ambassador has emphasized the importance of regular shipments in his meetings with senior Government officials, including in a March 23 meeting with Foreign Minister Bogollagama.

Local Worker's Flight

¶6. (SBU) Another UN agency has received direct information from a local worker regarding departure of civilians from the conflict area on the night of March 17-18 following civilian retaliations against the LTTE (Ref B). This local worker for a UN agency shared details of his flight with a group of some 20 civilians, crossing a river in the dark to reach the Sri Lankan army camp. They were well-treated upon arrival, and received food at every point of their journey from the conflict zone to camps in Vavuniya. This worker detailed abuses by the LTTE against trapped civilians in the conflict zone, including summary execution of people for not complying with cadres' orders or for opposing forced recruitment. He reports that anyone from the age of 12 years is eligible for forced labor and recruitment by the LTTE in what he called the "death field" where no food is available. According to this worker, he spent "2 days walking up and down the no fire zone with 30,000 rupees (US \$265) in his pocket, however not even a grain of rice could be bought." (Comment: the first 500MT food shipment was not fully offloaded until March 13, so this food aid came late for many. This report further illustrates civilians' reliance on food aid delivered by sea. End comment.)

IDPs in Jaffna

¶7. (SBU) Most internally displaced persons leaving the conflict

zone are being taken to Vavuniya (and in particular, Manik Farms). Several groups of civilians have fled by boat to the Jaffna peninsula; most of these arrivals are transferred to Vavuniya, with the exception of those originally from Jaffna. As of March 16, some 3,500 new arrivals since December 1, 2008 were housed in six sites in Jaffna area. UNHCR, UNICEF and ICRC have access to the sites, though several INGOs have not received permission to enter these locations.

Civilian Casualties and IDP Outflow

¶18. (SBU) Tamil sources from within the LTTE-controlled area report 131 civilians were killed and 133 injured on March 20-22. These sources report 1,695 arrivals into Government-controlled territory on March 20, including 455 ICRC-assisted evacuees, and 55 who fled by sea. These sources also report 1,163 arrivals on March 21, of whom 108 fled by sea and were rescued by the Navy (Note: Such reports from Tamil sources cannot be confirmed and are frequently exaggerated. However, in this instance the number of arrivals align with Government figures of some 3,000 arrivals for the same period.)

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